

DOWNTOWN / NEARTOWN

# ThisWeek

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**W**hen Bob Borochoff throws a party - he throws a party! Party on the Plaza starts its fourth year of free downtown concerts in Jones Plaza.

By Nick Herrera

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Mike Cowey Photo

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# Downtown's Party on the Plaza creates unlikely art patrons

By NICK HERRERA

**E**VERY Thursday night, Alvin motorcycle mechanic Mark Bofinger puts on his leather jacket and studded riding chaps, jumps on his Harley Davidson and cruises 30 minutes to downtown Houston to support the arts.

Janice Barkwell does her part, too. Each week she squeezes into her black, skin-tight shorts, laces up her roller skate boots, puts on her purple shades and skates the 10 minutes from Montrose to downtown's Jones Plaza for the weekly fundraiser.

These seemingly unlikely art patrons are just two of the 4,000-5,000 professionals, college students, bikers and Urban Animal-types who attend downtown Houston's weekly bash, Party on the Plaza, benefiting the city's blossoming Theater District.

The event, which to date has contributed more than \$170,000 over the past three years to the Theater District, began in 1984 when Houston entrepreneur Bob Borochoff, thought it would be fun to produce a free outdoor concert.

"The idea was to do a really fun, free outdoor musical event every Thursday or Friday night," Borochoff said.

"I thought we would expose the public to small local and regional bands. We would sell food and beverages and use that money to pay for the bands, raise a little money for some charity and hopefully make a profit," he said.

Borochoff — now president of Epic Special Events, Epic Catering, and Epic Restaurants — at the time was a struggling restaurateur, dabbling in the special events business.

Though the concert idea sounded great to a lot of people, nobody would touch it.

"I couldn't get sponsors," Borochoff said. "I couldn't get anybody interested in doing it. People were worried about the liability, about doing a party that was not controlled."

For about two years, Borochoff lobbied for sponsors of his idea, but came up empty-handed. His campaign included writing letters and meeting with Mayor Kathryn Whitmire for approval to conduct the event in a city park. She was receptive, Borochoff said, and passed the idea along to her staff.

Finally in June 1987, through efforts of the mayor's staff, Borochoff met with members of the city's Parks and Recreation Department and members of the downtown organization, Central Houston and its downtown Theater District task force which was looking for ways to revitalize the downtown area in the evenings. The match worked.

"I suggested we talk to Bob Eury, president of Central Houston and kind of built the program from there," said Parks and Recreation Director Don Olson.

Four years later, Olson praised the event as successful.

"It's a real good deal for the city and the people of Houston," Olson said, noting the weekly permit fees the city collects. "It is not a cut-rate event. It's done well. Bob (Borochoff) has certainly been in there, shoving it along. I give him full credit for really paying attention to being a good neighbor (to downtown businesses)."

But even with the city's approval, Borochoff was unable to get spon-

sorship before the first event was held in September 1987.

"I put up the money," Borochoff said. "We were a small company and it was very expensive. We had a very poor turnout and I lost about \$4,000."

"I multiplied eight times four and realized I was going to lose \$32,000. But I went out there and we did it the next week and the next week we lost money. I had to go out and use my Mastercard to pay for my bills in my restaurant," Borochoff said.

Borochoff said he hated to throw in the towel and cancel the remaining events, so after the second week, he met with Frank Horlock, the owner of what is now United Beverage, the Miller Lite distributorship and convinced him to donate \$6,000 as the Party on the Plaza's first official sponsor.

"I had been selling Miller Lite at the event and I went to Mr. Horlock and said, 'I've known you since I was 18. I've done a lot of events, a lot of catering, lots of things with you. I have never asked you for anything. All I want is \$6,000 — please — to be a sponsor at my event.'"

"He wrote me a check for \$6,000, which meant I was now only down \$2,000 and I was just thrilled!" Borochoff said.

Horlock's people also put Borochoff in touch with the people at Z107 radio station, which came on as the second sponsor, promoting the event on the air. With this backing, the crowds started to grow and the rest is history.

"When we started we had one policeman, we had four Port-a-cans, we had a singular band," Borochoff said. "I remember one Thursday night a guy got up with a boom box, put his microphone up to it and sang with it, because that's what we could afford. Today we have 40 Port-a-cans, and a total of about 30 security people, 20 uniformed. We've got 40 employees and we started with six."

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# Party

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"The economic impact of the event is phenomenal," he said. "Twenty off-duty policemen out there every week, a dozen T-shirt security, roughly 40 employees who work every single week for us pouring beer, cooking food, carrying boxes. We have a cleanup company that comes every week to clean up the plaza, a tent company, a sound company, the bands themselves, advertising for the event — it generates an immense amount of economic impact because it's 32 weeks a year. We spend in excess of \$400,000 a year to do that event."

Borochoff and Party on the Plaza sponsors recently presented Theater District officials a check for \$75,641.40 from proceeds of the 1990

season. In 1988 \$33,461.44 was given and in 1989 \$63,372.66 was donated.

"The money (from Party on the Plaza) goes to fund the Theater District project which covers everything from banners to planning," said Ange D. Finn, director of the Theater District, which offices with Central Houston at 1100 Louisiana. "The big push we're doing now is to enliven the streets visually. Our idea is to design a streetscape, so when one comes into the Theater District, the stage is set for entertainment and special events, like Party on the Plaza. The goal is for people to enjoy being there."

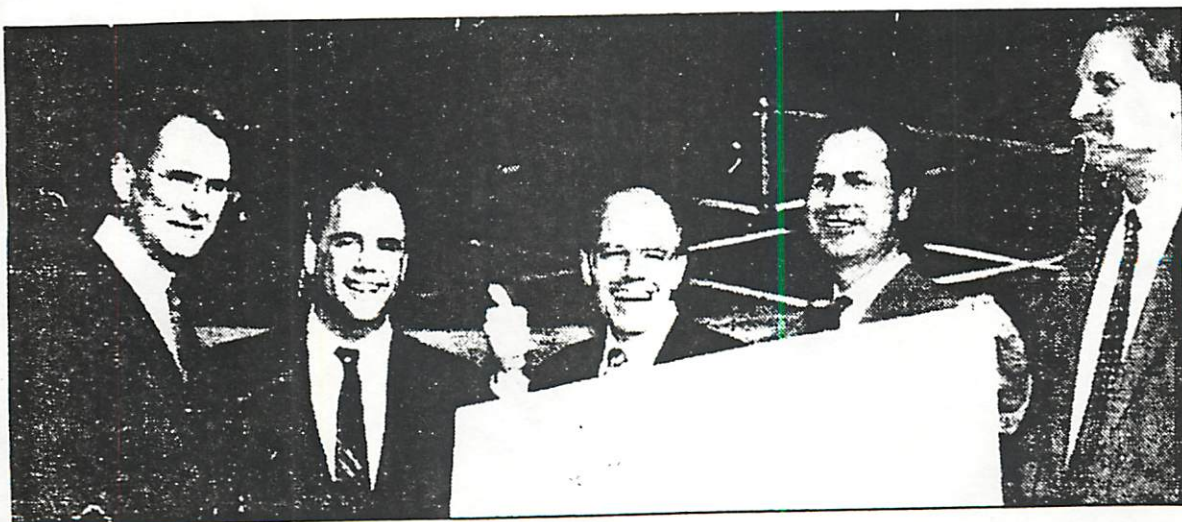
The Theater District is "both a project and a location," Finn said. "Roughly speaking, it's the area around our four downtown theaters — the Music Hall, Jones, Alley and Wortham. The geographical boundaries are Buffalo Bayou on the west side, Milam Street on the east, Preston on the north and Walker on the

south. We want people to start thinking of it as an entity." Recent uses of the funds include supplementing the initial cost of an evening mounted patrol for the Theater District, Finn said.

Many people may not realize that by attending the party, they are actually contributing to the arts in Houston, Finn said.

The reasons for attending seem to be as varied as the types of people attending the event.

"The most unique thing for me, is it's just a real neat location to have it, with the downtown buildings overhead," said Bofinger, 31, who spends his days building Harley Davidson motorcycle engines. "It's a different type of setting. The music and the camaraderie there is great. It's really neat how there's a bunch of suit and ties and Urban Animals and a real mixture. It's a big thing to ride out there and check out everybody else's bike."



Showing the results of last year's Party on the Plaza — a check to the Houston Theater District for more than \$75,000 — are, from left, Don Olson, director of the Houston Parks and Recreation Department; Bob Borochoff, president of

Epic Special Events; Bob Eury, president of Central Houston, representing the Theater District; Randy Peterson of Miller Beer and Ted Carson of Z107 Radio. Party on the Plaza is a collaborative effort of the group.